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MEMORANDUM

IRAN-IRAQ: Chances for Strikes Against Gulf States

Summary

The threat of an Iranian airstrike against Saudi Arabia's oil facilities or an attempt to mine the Strait of Hormuz has receded somewhat in the past 10 days as the Gulf states have backed away from overt support of Iraq. The Iranians are watching the Gulf states closely, however, and could make good their threats to attack if they perceive these states are moving to support Baghdad's military efforts.

Iranian officials in public continue to threaten the Saudis and shipping in the Strait, but they are careful to say that Iranian retaliation will occur only if the Saudis and other Gulf states first support Iraq. Tehran has never defined "support." Tehran would be likely to react if it believed that the Iraqis intended to stage attacks against Iran from Gulf airfields, but we have no good information on Iranian intentions. They might use some military measures if they detected any significant Iraqi air force buildup along the Gulf or if the Saudis allow the Soviets to significantly resupply Iraq through Saudi Red Sea ports.

Tehran's perception of the threshold for attack would probably be significantly lower if Iranian leaders believed their military situation had become so desperate that they

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needed to spread the war to induce the great powers to intervene to end the conflict. We have no indication, however, that Tehran now sees its strategic situation as desperate. Tehran has been buoyed by its forces' ability to slow the Iraqi advance, significant domestic fuel shortages are still weeks away, morale among the civilian population remains high, and many fundamentalist Iranians believe Saddam Hussein's government will eventually topple. Iran knows Iraq's forces lack the capability to march on Tehran and impose a settlement.

Moreover, Tehran opposes superpower intervention in the conflict at this point because it fears both the US and Soviets seek to replace the Khomeini regime. An Iranian "lashout" strike is most likely when Tehran perceives its situation as close to hopeless and decides to punish the Arabs and the West.

Iraq could choose to deliberately precipitate an Iranian airstrike in order to bring in the superpowers and end the war. At this point, however, there is no sign that Baghdad feels superpower intervention is necessary. Iraq will probably keep up its efforts to persuade Gulf states to join the war effort, however, insuring that tensions remain high.



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